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SUBJECT: LAGHMAN: ALINGAR, ALLIHANG VILLAGERS EXPRESS SUPPORT FOR ELECTIONS

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Villagers in areas of reported anti-Afghan forces (AAF) activity expressed support for the August 20 presidential and Provincial Council elections. A large shura in Alishang District, at which the provincial governor and police commander spoke, appeared to be a notable success, with speakers calling on residents to support the national and provincial governments. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On August 4 the Mehtarlam Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) supported the holding of a shura (tribal council) in Watangatu village in the Alishang District, an area reported to have AAF elements actively discouraging locals from participating in the upcoming elections. Governor Lutfullah Mashal and several other high-ranking provincial officials attended the event, including Afghan National Police (ANP) Provincial Commander General Omeryahr and Afghan National Army (ANA) Colonel Mohammed. Participating locals numbered about 300, and included attendees from more than ten surrounding villages. Officials said the shura was one of the largest government-supported shuras ever held in Laghman.

¶3. (SBU) The general mood of the audience was quite positive, with numerous elders saying their residents intended to vote. No expression of support for any particular candidate was made, although several speakers urged locals to meet and debate the merits of the various contenders. Several speakers were enthusiastic about the strengthening of the local and provincial governments, and recognized the importance of the elections for that purpose. Locals asked the governor and ANP commander for increased security, and requested help in resolving local disputes, including some violent clan feuds.

¶4. (SBU) On August 6, the PRT visited two small villages in Alingar District, areas also reportedly frequented by AAF forces. Each village was home to an estimated 300 to 400 families.

¶5. (SBU) In the first village, the PRT spoke first to several dozen male residents age 18 to about 30. They all said they intended to vote, although they did not indicate which party or candidates they preferred. Shortly thereafter, the PRT was approached by a small group of much older men, who proclaimed themselves to be the elders of that village and another neighboring settlement. In an impromptu shura of approximately 12 elders, they indicated that they supported the elections, and claimed that "all" adult males and females in their villages had registered. Those interviewed knew where their polling place would be located. The (very) small village store had several posters for provincial council candidates displayed. No anti-government slogans or other symbols were on display.

¶6. (SBU) Asked about the village's needs, elders asked for a piped-in water source, and for the paving of the road to their village. Although they knew the name of their provincial council representative, attendees claimed that he had never visited them, and seemed to have little idea of whom they could contact in the provincial government to make requests for water and road improvement.

¶7. (SBU) There was somewhat less activity in the second village, which had no store and fewer adult males in evidence. However, the villagers referred the PRT to an individual they identified as the village headman. That individual received the PRT cordially, and conducted a small shura with the PRT and a cluster of about 20 locals under the shade of a tree outside his residence. Treating the attendees to tea and snacks, he said that his village intended to participate in the elections, and claimed that all male and female adults had registered to vote.

¶8. (SBU) Just like the residents of the first village, the headman said that he had no contact with the provincial council, but said that campaigners for council candidates had been through the area. He expressed gratitude for the efforts and sacrifices of "foreign friends" and enmity for those "bad people" who encouraged locals not to support their national government.

¶9. (SBU) Comment. Other sources have indicated that AAF activity and threats against locals and against the election are very real, and the villagers' support for the elections and the Afghan government may not be as simple as they would appear to be. However, the evidence of campaign activity, the locals' knowledge of the election process, and their willingness to engage with the PRT would seem to be evidence at least that AAF forces do not completely control the area or the actions of its residents. End comment.

¶10. (U) This cable has been reviewed by PRT Mehtarlam Commander Lt. Col. Ungerma.

EIKENBERRY